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SUBJECT: 'TAMIL TIGERS' ARMS SMUGGLING ON THE UPSWING

REF: 2006 Chennai 1426

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Smuggling of arms and bomb-making materials by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam between the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka appears to be on the rise. Indian authorities seized three vessels last week carrying arms and bomb-making material. Most troublingly, one of the seized vessels carried a large suicide bomb vest. Although initial reports suggested that the bomb vest was intended for use against a target in India, further investigation cast significant doubt on that theory. END SUMMARY

WEAPONS SMUGGLING ON THE RISE

¶2. (SBU) On February 12, the Indian Navy seized a vessel carrying more than 6,000 pounds of aluminum bars along with large quantities of metal rings, gaskets, and pins likely for assembling improvised explosive devices. On February 13, the Indian Coast Guard seized another vessel: this one contained weapons and ammunition, several drums of liquid chemical, detonators, and most troublingly, a vest with 15 pounds of explosive stitched into various compartments for use in a suicide attack. A day later, on February 14, the Indian Navy seized a third vessel carrying three tons of non-ferrous metals for use in explosives manufacture. The vessels seized on February 12 and 14 were undoubtedly going from Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka; there is some ambiguity about the origin and destination of the vessel seized on February 13 (see paragraphs 4 and 5).

¶3. (SBU) On February 20, police raided a compound in Tamil Nadu where they found more than 4,000 pounds of aluminum ingots. According the police, the Tigers were going to ship the ingots to Sri Lanka in vessels such as those seized by Indian authorities the week prior. The ingots were to be used as components in improvised explosive devices.

¶4. (SBU) After a period of minimal weapons trafficking (reftel), the seizures signal an upsurge in smuggling of arms and supplies between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. A journalist who has closely observed the Tamil Nadu/Sri Lanka relationship for more than 20 years believes that smuggling is becoming increasingly frequent. He noted it is difficult to detect and interdict smugglers because there are several hundred small fishing craft plying the waters between Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu every day. B. Raman, an independent analyst (formerly with India's equivalent of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Research and Analysis Wing), wrote that "the latest seizure, coming in the wake of other material such as the ball bearings seized earlier, clearly show that the [Tamil Tigers], in its desperate attempts to replenish its stocks, has embarked on a major drive to re-activate its procurement network in India." Raman argues that recent military successes by the Sri Lankan army, coupled with a drying up of its other overseas arms suppliers, have forced the Tigers to look to India for re-supply.

SUICIDE VEST DESTINED FOR ATTACK ON INDIAN SOIL? DOUBTFUL.

15. (SBU) Initial descriptions of the February 13 incident said that the seized vessel was traveling from Sri Lanka to Tamil Nadu. After towing the vessel into Chennai harbor, the Coast Guard regional commander Rajendra Singh held an unusual press conference where he proudly displayed the "big catch" of seized weapons and bomb materials and said that "[c]ertainly, the boat is from Sri Lanka, heading for a destination somewhere along the Tamil Nadu coast." According to local news reports, Singh further opined that "our preliminary assessment is that the [suicide vest] was meant to cause destruction in a big congregation" such as a religious festival or election event.

16. (SBU) The Tamil Nadu authorities quickly disavowed the Coast Guard's version of events after taking custody of the suspects. A late night press release from the police said the Tiger vessel was traveling between points within Sri Lanka when it was chased into Indian waters by the Sri Lankan Navy. Additional Director General of Police (Intelligence) Nanjil Kumaran informed post that the Tamil Nadu police were confident that the vessel was not headed for Indian territory. Kumaran said Sri Lanka's recent military offensive has severed many Tamil Tiger overland supply lines, forcing the Tigers to rely more on the sea lanes. The vessel seized on February 13 was, according to him, a standard Tamil Tiger supply boat ferrying materials between points in Sri Lanka.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Post puts more credence in the Tamil Nadu police's assessment that the vessel was traveling between points in Sri Lanka rather than headed to India. Although the Coast Guard has not formally withdrawn Commander Singh's version of events, it has

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not presented a defense after the subsequent contradictory statements by the Tamil Nadu authorities. This silence speaks volumes. Moreover, the Coast Guard vessel which conducted the seizure did not have a single Tamil speaker on board. Given the lack of a common language, the Coast Guard interpretation of events is likely a simple miscommunication.

18. (SBU) The Tigers have not conducted a major attack in India since the 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. A mass casualty suicide attack against Indian civilians would likely backfire against the Tigers, as did the 1991 assassination. They are unlikely to make the same mistake twice. END COMMENT.

KAPLAN